

Written evidence submitted by The Children's Society

# **The impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services.**

## **Education Select Committee Inquiry** *Written Evidence by The Children's Society*

### **1. Introduction and Summary**

The Children's Society is a leading national charity committed to improving the lives of thousands of children and young people every year. We work across the country with some of the most disadvantaged children and young people through our specialist services. We place their voices at the centre of the work that we do.

The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted the life of every child in the country. It is not only an unprecedented public health emergency, but also a challenge our society and our economy have not seen in peacetime. There is no denying that the Government – and other decision makers at every level - face a colossal challenge.

The Children's Society are working across civil society to do all we can to support the collective effort to face Covid-19 crisis, and to ensure the social and economic effects of the coronavirus are not felt in the lives of our children in the years ahead. Our organisation is also taking a leading role in the children's sector in helping to collate evidence from the frontline of children's services as well as with emergency financial support providers. This live evidence base of emerging issues is being fed back to government on a regular basis and will also be referenced too throughout this evidence submission.

We welcome the Education Select Committee's inquiry into the impact of Covid-19 on education and children's services. Our frontline evidence will form the basis of this evidence submission. We have chosen to answer a selection of the questions within the terms of reference where we can provide detailed explanation and evidence. Recommendations can be found at the end of each section.

This evidence submission focuses on the impact of covid-19 on education and children's services with a particular focus on vulnerable children and young people. We have used evidence from our frontline services as well as evidence submitted too us from our children's services evidence collection form<sup>1</sup> of which a number of children's charities are working together on to analyse and interpret the responses, as of 29<sup>th</sup> May this form had received over 168 responses from frontline practitioners.

This submission focuses on looked after children in different types of settings as well as children at risk of exploitation or domestic abuse, children who go missing, young carers, children in poverty and refuge and migrant children. School is a protective factor in vulnerable young people's lives and without it, the risks surrounding that young person increase.

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<sup>1</sup><https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=SOAKNBzYq06lpLdJH6ikCHR939zAbv9Aq3I6KKCCb1xUNVhYUks1WTE5MVc2VTNUMkw1SEFLWThQTS4u>

## **2. The capacity of children's services to support vulnerable children and young people.**

We recognise that children's services across the country will be working at reduced capacity during the Covid-19 crisis due to staff sickness, reduced working hours as staff take on additional caring responsibilities at home and as well as some staff being furloughed. We understand that all local authority children's services will have to adapt to new ways of working and will have to prioritise some aspects of their workload over the other. However, we strongly believe that the most vulnerable children in society must continue to be provided with the support that they need and where there are escalating or new concerns regarding a child this must still be acted upon.

Local authorities are in the midst of a financial crisis and they have fought hard to limit the impact of funding cuts to frontline children and young people's services. Local authority spending on early intervention services for children and young people has fallen from £3.5 billion to £1.9 billion between 2010/11 and 2018/19 – a 46% decrease.<sup>2</sup> Whilst central government has provided unrestricted cash injections to local authorities to cope during this pandemic we must acknowledge the increased financial pressure they are under.

The Children's Society in partnership with other organisations have been gathering intelligence using an online form from across the children's sector around the issues that professionals are seeing on the ground. Whilst the findings are in no means representative of all those working within children's services across the country, some of the findings shed light on the impact the Covid-19 crisis has had on the way in which children's services are able to support vulnerable young people. The overarching theme throughout the responses is that staff are unable to reach vulnerable children and young people during this crisis. Below are some reasons as to why:

### **2.1) Thresholds for support**

We are hearing from professionals working in children's social care that thresholds for face to face visits are too high. We have heard examples of face to face contact only happening for Section 47 enquires in some areas and different restrictions in place in others. It is clear that practice is inconsistent across even neighbouring local authorities. Other professionals have stated they have used the RAG rating tools to assess the needs of the children and young people they are working with and none of these young people have scored high enough for face to face support to continue during this period. The practitioner went on to state these young people scored highly due to protective factors being in place for this young person, such as having a social worker or being in residential care with staff to hand. Whilst these young people might be in contact with their social worker or be surrounded by residential staff they are still acutely vulnerable and require ongoing face to face support but support in effect is being discontinued. It is clear that there has been a focus on shifting to crisis care which is leaving many children and young people at risk of their situations escalating without appropriate safeguards in place.

We have also heard from professionals that are receiving new referrals during this crisis, these professionals are finding it challenging building trusted relationships with young people and their families as these assessments are having to take place remotely.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/childrens-and-young-peoples-services-funding-and-spending-report-2018-19\\_1.pdf](https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/childrens-and-young-peoples-services-funding-and-spending-report-2018-19_1.pdf)

## **2.2) Issues relating to new ways of working**

We are hearing that young people not having access to phones, laptops or the internet is acting as a huge barrier for social workers being able to continue their work with some vulnerable children and their families. Therefore, even where services have moved online, some young people are not accessing them because they lack internet connectivity, or the resources are not being provided inclusively – particularly problematic for non-native English speakers. Whilst the Department's recently announced digital package which might help some of these young people, the rollout is still some months away and many young people are unable to be contacted now. Even when it occurs, many digitally excluded young people will not be eligible for support.

In instances where they are able to maintain contact through the use of technology there are concerns around the confidentiality of calls and young people not being able to communicate openly and disclose safeguarding issues due to fear of being over heard. We have heard that whilst digital communication is working well for some young people, for others it is a distinct barrier to offering support.

## **2.3) Maintaining contact**

Some of the evidence suggests that young people are beginning to tire of communicating with social care staff remotely meaning that staff are struggling to maintain regular contact with at risk children and young people. It was suggested that too much focus is going into maintaining contact with children and families that there is no time to progress with any ongoing work with young people - known issues are being forgotten and young people are deteriorating.

## **2.4) Children's social care staff personal safety**

Children's social care staff that responded to our survey frequently mentioned the lack of required Personal Protection Equipment (PPE). Whilst they had concerns about their own health and safety what came across most strongly was the need to have PPE in order to carry out necessary home visits on vulnerable children and families. Put simply, without PPE they cannot check on the welfare of some of the most at risk children. It is also clear that they lack guidance around when PPE should be worn and what constitutes a necessary visit. For example one professional stated they were only instructed to wear PPE when undertaking Section 47 enquiries, and others have chosen to buy their own so not to risk their own health and that of their families. Those working for children's social care should not be forced to choose between their own safety and the safety of those they are working with.

- *Recommendation 1: The Department for Education must produce clear guidance for children's social care staff on which children and families should be receiving face to face visits and how to maintain effective working with those who do not meet the threshold for face to face support.*
- *Recommendation 2: Children's social care staff should not be expected to make visits if they feel there is a risk to their own health. Guidance on when and where staff should wear PPE must be issued and a sufficient supply of PPE be made available for children's social care staff.*

We feel that at present, some of the most vulnerable children in society including; looked after children, young carers, children at risk of being exploited, those who go missing, children living in unregulated accommodation, children at risk of abuse or neglect at home

and care leavers are not being supported sufficiently and risk falling off the radar being placed at increased risk of harm.

## 2.5 Looked after children

Looked after children are some of the most vulnerable in society and we are concerned that the situation for many of them will likely get worse over the next few months and potentially years as a result of Covid-19.

Through our intelligence gathering form, we have heard examples of looked after young people not having information about placements communicated to them effectively and have heard that young people are facing delays on hearing back from their children's services following complaints being made. We know from our direct work with looked after children that having a sense of autonomy over their care and being involved in decisions made about them decreases their likelihood of going missing from care. We are concerned that as more and more looked after children face delays in communication about their care we will see a rise in the numbers of children going missing from their placements. It is vital that children's voices are not lost in this crisis. Looked after young people must continue to be kept involved and informed about any decisions being made about their care.

Concerningly, a set of Statutory Instruments that came into force in April 24<sup>th</sup> 2020<sup>3</sup>, made changes to regulations which will impact on some children in the care of their local authority. Whilst we acknowledge that we are living through unprecedented times leading to huge pressures placed on local authorities, we are concerned that some of the changes announced risk leaving looked after children at greater risk.

Some of these relaxations include; relaxation of requirements around the frequency of social worker visits to children in care, independent reviews of individual children's care, the weakening of care standards in children's homes, relaxation of the number of Ofsted inspections of children's homes as well the number of independent visits and reports on children's homes, the increased duration of emergency foster placements and a relaxation of safeguarding checks for new foster carers are just some of the changes that we believe will be detrimental to the lives of many looked after children and young people. We feel that some of these measures could leave children living in inappropriate placements for longer periods of time without the opportunity to voice their concerns or be listened to.

Whilst the new regulations are only intended to be in place temporarily, we are concerned that during a time when some looked after children will likely need more protection, many of their rights and entitlements are being reduced. The relaxation of standards appear to be open to local authorities irrespective of how they are coping during the Covid-19 crisis. We believe that only some of these relaxations should come into effect if a local authority's operational capabilities fall beneath a certain level. For example, if a proportion of staff are off sick then social workers should be allowed to check in on certain children and young people via a phone.

In addition,

- *Recommendation 3: It should be ensured that Local authorities only implement the changes set out in this Statutory Instrument if they can demonstrate that their operational capacity falls beneath a certain level, and they can show such changes are necessary in order to respond.*

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2020/445/contents/made>

## 2.6 Young carers

Schedule 12 of the Coronavirus Act<sup>4</sup> states that a local authority does not have to comply with duties to assess an adult's need for care and support and their carer's needs, including young carers. Whilst this is done with the intention of prioritising services local authorities can offer to the most urgent and serious case needs, this must not be done at the expense of leaving children to care for their family without statutory support.

The Coronavirus Act can restrict assessments to the most urgent for up to two years – this risks some young carers having their assessments delayed indefinitely. As young carers are hidden within society, there must be a minimum requirement for local authorities to regularly check on the welfare of known young carers and young carers that have recently transitioned to adulthood. We believe that the Government should ensure that when a Care Act assessment is delayed due to Covid-19 it is evidenced and documented, with an appeal process in place. Signposting must also be in place for young carers to seek support from non-statutory services.

- *Recommendation 4: A minimum requirement should be put in place for local authorities to regularly check on the welfare of known young people and young carers that have recently transitioned to adulthood to ensure that they have the support they need and all agencies should coordinate intelligence around families who are struggling.*

## 2.7 Children at risk of exploitation

Covid-19 and the resulting measures put in place by government will likely lead to less oversight of vulnerable young people – particularly those who are not formally recognised by the social care system – as day to day contact with professionals becomes less frequent and school attendance is not mandatory. This may afford greater opportunities for targeting and grooming by individuals outside their families for sexual or criminal purposes. For example, there have been reports that children and vulnerable adults are still being forced to travel from cities to towns and villages as part of 'county lines' drug trafficking<sup>5</sup> and exploiters have simply switched the main methods of travel from trains to private hire cars.

Our services are also increasingly concerned about the growing gap in communication between schools, social services and the police regarding vulnerable pupil's attendance. Whilst guidance is in place to report attendance we are hearing this is not happening in practice meaning some young people are going unaccounted and are falling between the gaps of different services. This is being used by perpetrators to criminally exploit children.

Where these children are known to services we would like to see a trusted professional identified who is tasked with making regular contacts and checking on the wellbeing of a child – we have heard anecdotal evidence of trusted relationships between young people and professionals being effected as more and more staff move onto furlough and professionals roles change in response to staff sickness and shortages.

As lockdown measures continue however, there will be a risk that more children will be exposed to exploitation. It is crucial that professionals are provided with up to date guidance on how to recognise the signs of exploitation and how and where to report concerns. Effective systems for referral and assessment of children's needs must also be maintained, but at the same time that police and any other professionals or members of the public should

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2020/7/contents/enacted/data.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/apr/13/gangs-still-forcing-children-into-county-lines-drug-trafficking-police-covid-19-lockdown>

be encouraged to be aware of the vulnerability of some young people and to alert the authorities where they have concerns about a child. In cases of criminal exploitation it is important that NRM referrals are always considered when exploitation is identified and that in court cases judges are instructed to consider statutory defence under the Modern Slavery Act.<sup>6</sup>

We have heard examples of looked after children are ‘choosing’ to self-isolate at the homes of their partners meaning that contact from children’s social care is diminished. We are concerned that this is placing these vulnerable children at risk of exploitation and other harms. It is vital that these young people do not slip under the radar due to social isolation measures. Social workers must ensure that they maintain contact with all children on their case load irrespective of where they are isolating.

- *Recommendation 5: Police, workers on public transport and other professionals – as well as the general public – should be made aware of the potential risks to young people who are out and about when they should be at home – and encouraged to take an appropriate approach to safeguarding them.*

## 2.8 Children and young people missing from home or care

There is a strong link between children and young people being exploited and going missing from home or care.<sup>7</sup> We know from our research that the principal trigger for running away is problems at home.<sup>8</sup> These will likely be exacerbated by the current social isolation restrictions in place.

For many children and young people going missing can feel like their only option – and there are likely to be many more who feel this way as the effects of isolation are experienced. It is vital that they receive an adequate response from all statutory agencies. Children who go missing are statutorily entitled to an offer return home interview (RHI) when they return. The interview should be an informal conversation between the young person and an independent trusted adult and should identify any harm that the child came to, risks that they may still be facing and should identify and follow-up support needed to help keep the young person safe.

We know that RHIs are being delivered successfully over the phone for many children and young people – we have heard that for some young people this method of delivery is working well. However, we are concerned about those children and young people who may not be able to speak freely on the phone about the reasons why they went missing. They could be living with a perpetrator of abuse or feel uncomfortable talking about personal issues and experiences in an environment where they could be overheard. It is vital that RHI providers take steps to ensure that children and young people are able to signal if they are unable to communicate openly with their practitioner. In these instances practitioners must, where safe to do so, explore alternative ways of speaking to the young person – no young person should be left at risk of problems or harms escalating during this crisis.

- *Recommendation 6: Local authorities must ensure, where feasible, that RHIs for children who go missing from home and care continue to happen albeit in different ways. Practitioners must be given the freedom to work creatively and in a child centred way to ensure that all children and young people are able to express their worries and concerns in a safe way.*

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/30/contents/enacted>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/counting-lives-report.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/still\\_running\\_3\\_full\\_report\\_final.pdf](https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/still_running_3_full_report_final.pdf)

## 2.9 Children placed in out of area placements and unregulated accommodation

More than 4 in 10 looked after children are placed outside of the authority in whose care they are in.<sup>9</sup> We know that these children and young people are at greater risk of going missing and becoming victims of exploitation than those looked after children living within the boundaries of their home local authority.<sup>10</sup> It is vital that as corporate parents, both the government and local authorities put in place robust plans to ensure adequate support is provided to these children and young people throughout the coronavirus outbreak.

Looked after children in out of area care placements face a unique set of challenges during this crisis. For example, closure of transport links will mean that for many young people in out of area placements the opportunity for contact with their social worker, family and friends will become non-existent – this may result in increased missing episodes. We have also heard informal evidence that foster carers are unable to accept some children and young people during the COVID-19 outbreak due to their insurance policies, meaning this will likely increase the number of children and young people placed in out of area placements as well as in semi-independent (unregulated) accommodation.

We are concerned about those children placed in unregulated accommodation and how many of these settings are not fit for purpose. All too often we hear from young people that they don't feel safe in these settings, they report not knowing who to turn to with problems and some young people report sharing accommodation with adults experiencing problems with their mental health or with substance misuse.<sup>11</sup> It is crucial that these young people are provided with up to date health and safety information, they must be kept safe from other individuals who pose a health risk to them and they must be cared for in instances of them becoming sick themselves.

- *Recommendation 7: All looked after children, and especially those living in out of area placements, should be supported to keep in touch with friends and family via phone and other digital methods of communication.*
- *Recommendation 8: Young people living in unregulated accommodation must be provided with up to date health and safety information, they must be kept safe from other individuals who pose a health risk to them and they must be cared for in instances of them becoming sick themselves.*

## 2.10 Domestic abuse

With school closures and 'stay at home' guidance now in place, the opportunity for children who experience domestic abuse being identified and getting much needed support has vastly diminished as many routine contacts will now be cancelled. We are concerned that these measures will result in less children at risk being identified for support and stay hidden from view.

The government needs to set out how they plan to support professionals to identify concerns about children in environment where families may well have limited contact with others. Current guidance for children's social care services from the Department for Education is patchy and unclear. We are very concerned with the discretionary powers being signalled to local authorities through this guidance<sup>12</sup>. This is leading to local authorities prioritising or de-prioritising areas of support differently due to capacity issues. Through our work with families in London we have seen some local authorities ceasing all face to face contact with young

<sup>9</sup>[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/850306/Children\\_looked\\_after\\_in\\_England\\_2019\\_Text.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/850306/Children_looked_after_in_England_2019_Text.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/no-place-at-home.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/what-we-do/resources-and-publications/appg-inquiry-into-children-missing-from-out-of-area-placements>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-childrens-social-care-services>

people who live in households with known domestic abuse whereas in others face to face visits are continuing.

These risks also highlights the importance of preserving effective systems for referral and assessment of children's needs, but also that police and any other professionals or members of the public should be encouraged to be aware of the vulnerability of some young people and to alert the authorities where they have concerns about a child. Tailored and targeted awareness raising campaigns directed at children and young people is also vital in providing information to those who need it most.

- *Recommendation 9: The Department for Education guidance on supporting vulnerable children and young people during the Covid-19 outbreak must be amended to provide more clarity on how local authorities should be supporting vulnerable children and young people living in their areas. The DFE should also provide opportunities to share good practice they develop in responding to families to enable the development of consistent approaches across the country.*

## 2.11 Care leavers

Care leavers are also a uniquely disadvantaged group, starting their adult lives without the networks of support which many of us take for granted. In the wake of the current crisis, Local Authorities are likely to face additional pressures and struggle to meet some statutory duties towards these young people; government guidance to Local Authorities therefore leaves specific points to their discretion, to make child-centred, risk-based assessments.<sup>13</sup>

Under the new emergency measures (Schedule 12 of the Coronavirus Act)<sup>14</sup>, Local Authorities will no longer be required to carry out certain care assessments, for example, regarding looked after children's transition into adulthood. This has the potential to leave care leavers seeking to transition in a state of uncertainty. The Department for Education's 3<sup>rd</sup> April guidance suggests that Local Authorities should act in the 'best interest of care leavers' and use their discretion to assess whether care leavers should continue to transition into independent living or remain in their placement during the crisis. We support giving young people the option to 'stay put' in current placements, where it is safe and appropriate, which would allow for a level of stability and support during this crisis.

We welcome the recent announcement from the Department for Education that they will provide laptops and 4G routers to vulnerable groups of children and young people whilst schools are closed – including care leavers who are preparing for exams. However, there may be other care leavers – that do not fall into this group – who do not have internet access and are isolated or unable to access key information and support because of this.

- *Recommendation 10: When assessing if a young person should transition out of care into independent living, there should be clear communication with the young person in question and 'best interests' should give due weight to the young person's choices, provided this does not jeopardise their safety.*
- *Recommendation 11: Additional government funding should be provided to extend 'staying put' placements to allow Local Authorities greater flexibility to ensure this provision could be implemented.*
- *Recommendation 12: Extension of the Department for Education offer so that more care leavers who do not have internet access are able to receive support through this scheme.*

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-childrens-social-care-services/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-local-authorities-on-childrens-social-care>, published 3 April 2020

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2020/7/contents/enacted/data.html>

### **3. The effect of cancelling formal exams, including the fairness of qualifications awarded and pupils' progression to the next stage of employment and education.**

Exams are a significant cause of pressure and anxiety for children, many of whom will be greatly impacted by the uncertainty caused by the decision to cancel exams in pursuit of alternative assessment arrangements. For many, this could have consequences for their mental health and well-being. Some may feel stressed and anxious about their future and how this may be impacted in the absence of formal exams, whilst others may feel they have lost their sense of purpose now that they have no exams to work towards.

The government needs to make sure that clear and timely information is available urgently to children worried about their exams and resources available for those who continue to feel anxious about their futures. A secondary theme from the children's services intelligence form is the growing concern and the impact the lockdown is having on children and young people's well-being and mental health. This is consistent with our own findings and services, The Children's Society has experienced a 90% increase in traffic to our mental health and wellbeing support pages on our website during this crisis. There is a sense from frontline practitioners that children and young people are being left out of the government communication strategy and this must be urgently addressed in order to reassure millions of worried children, young people and parents across the UK.

The government should look to other countries in developing its communication plan for children and young people. For example, New Zealand's Prime Minister recently held a press conference specifically for children to allow them to ask questions about the crisis. This approach of providing children and young people specific information should be adopted in the UK with, for example, regular virtual question sessions for children and young people to ask their questions directly of Ministers and experts.

The cancelling of formal exams will also disproportionately impact some groups of children and young people, including Looked after children, Care Leavers and children on the edge of care. It has been recognised that by the age of 16 the educational attainment of most of these children falls well behind the average for their age. Recent analysis by the Sutton Trust has also warned that disadvantaged pupils are likely suffer learning loss and thereby the attainment gap is likely to grow further as a direct result of the national lockdown<sup>15</sup>. These groups are much less likely than average to move into higher education.<sup>16</sup> With formal exams no longer taking place, there is the risk that the opportunity for this group to move onto further and higher education could be significantly hampered. During this period, further educational institutions and universities should move to a process of contextual admissions to take into account a young person's vulnerabilities and specific circumstances to ensure these group have an equal and fair opportunity for their future.

- *Recommendation 13: The Government should adopt a children and young people specific communications plan to ensure this group is supported during the crisis. This should include giving children and young people the opportunity to ask questions of Ministers and experts through virtual sessions.*

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.tes.com/news/disadvantaged-pupils-face-six-month-learning-loss>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/12-by-24>

- *Recommendation 14: The Department for Education and the Office for Students should instruct further educational institutions and universities to move to a process of contextual admissions now that exams have been cancelled to ensure all decisions take into account a young person's vulnerabilities and specific circumstances.*

## 4. Support for pupils and families during closures.

The Government's decision to close schools is unprecedented in recent history and speaks to the scale of the crisis. Yet, these closures will have a dramatic impact on children, young people and their families as schools are a place of safety and support for many. In this section we address the mental health and well-being support on offer to children, the support for young carers and access to IT equipment for children.

### 4.1 Mental health and well-being support

There are currently one in eight children aged 5-19 in England who have a diagnosable mental health condition.<sup>17</sup> Covid-19 may result in heightened feelings of anxiety and worry and could exacerbate low-mood and other mental health conditions. A study from the University of Oxford, which is tracking the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of children and young people, has already identified that as many as one in five primary aged children are afraid to leave their homes.<sup>18</sup>

Schools are an important source of mental health and well-being support for children, young people and their families. Our previous research has identified that children rated an adult at school as one of the sources of help they would most likely go to if they had concerns about their feelings or behaviour.<sup>19</sup> We also know that schools are a popular source of support for parents when they are worried about their child's mental health.<sup>20</sup>

The closure of schools will have a disproportionate impact on children and young people who receive support with their mental health and well-being in school. This will not only include more formal support that is provided through the provision of school based counselling but also more informal pastoral support that is provided to pupils on a daily basis. There are also risks to those children and young people with emerging mental health needs and a school's ability to be able to identify these. Schools play a key role in identifying needs and signposting and referring to further support. Given students are now not regularly interacting with professionals, it is likely that emerging mental ill health could go unrecognised and children and young people are left without support.

With schools closing, other forms of mental health support will become even more important. We know that GP's are a key source of support for parents when they are worried about their child's mental health.<sup>21</sup> Whilst GP's have swiftly adapted to providing support online, the Royal College of General Practitioners have recently commented that digital GP appointments could make it difficult for doctors to diagnose and manage patients' mental health difficulties during the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>22</sup> What is more, it remains unclear what the impact has been on NHS Children and Young People's Mental Health Services (CYPMHS). It has been reported that referrals to NHS CYPMHS in Birmingham have seen a 50% reduction since Covid-19 measures were first introduced in March.<sup>23</sup> It could be

<sup>17</sup> <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2017/2017>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/10/fifth-of-primary-children-afraid-to-leave-house-because-of-covid-19-survey-find>

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/reaching-out-briefing\\_0.pdf](https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/reaching-out-briefing_0.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/what-we-do/resources-and-publications/finding-help-children-young-people-and-families-navigating-the>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/what-we-do/resources-and-publications/finding-help-children-young-people-and-families-navigating-the>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.hsj.co.uk/technology-and-innovation/digital-appointments-could-be-storing-up-problems-for-the-future/7027421.article>

hypothesised that this drop off could be as a result in a decline in referrals from schools and GP's. If this is indicative of the national picture, then it should be a cause of concern that children and young people with mental health difficulties are not being identified for support and receiving the help they need.

It is not yet clear what alternative methods of support are being put in place for children and young people with mental health difficulties, and for those with emerging needs. The increased need for this support is highlighted by the sharp rise in ChildLine calls since the outbreak of the pandemic, with over 2,200 counselling sessions delivered to children and young people who expressed concerns about coronavirus between January and April 2020.<sup>24</sup> Local areas should consider how they can reach out to children, young people and their families to ensure information is provided on the mental health support that is available to them during this time so that families are not struggling in silence.

Whilst guidance for schools on the closures does make reference to support for children with mental health difficulties and the digital support that is available, the guidance lacks clarity and specific details on the support to be made available by schools. The Government should be clearer about the plans that should be put in place for pupils who are currently receiving mental health support from their school to prevent their mental health from deteriorating.

With the expectation that schools and other mental health support services should move to deliver support online, it should be recognised that this can have significant consequences for practitioners. Many are not trained to deliver online support and may not have the skills to deal with high levels of disinhibition or the confidence to safeguard effectively online. The Department of Health and Social Care should look to provide free basic training on online therapeutic counselling and mental health support in order to support the thousands of self-employed, casual, and volunteer counsellors and therapists in this country who do not work for the NHS but provide crucial community support for children and young people, including in schools.

The Government should also provide clarity on what will happen to the roll out of the Green Paper proposals during the crisis and how Mental Health Support Teams will be providing support to both children and young people and to schools.

Social workers will also be limited in their capacity to provide mental health support to children and young people. Social workers work with a significant number of young people who present with mental health needs and there is a risk that this could be heightened during the crisis. The Local Government Association identified that children's services already see more than 500 cases a day of children presenting with a mental health condition.<sup>25</sup> Many NHS Children and Young People's Mental Health Services (CPYMHS) will be pushed to capacity at this time and there has been a lack of clarity on whether these services will be accepting new referrals now that support is moving online. Our previous research has also identified that one of the more pressing areas for training for social work professionals is around supporting the well-being and mental health needs of adolescents.<sup>26</sup> This lack of available support and training on mental health for social workers could impede their ability to support children and young people with difficulties.

## 4.2 Young carers

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.hsj.co.uk/coronavirus/major-drop-off-in-referrals-to-childrens-mental-health-services/7027373.article>

<sup>24</sup> <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/2195/what-children-are-saying-to-childline-about-coronavirus.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> [https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Conference%20paper\\_13.1%20WEB.pdf](https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Conference%20paper_13.1%20WEB.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> [https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/survey-of-social-workers-about-16-and-17-support\\_0.pdf](https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/survey-of-social-workers-about-16-and-17-support_0.pdf)

Data from the latest census estimates there are 166,363 young carers in England<sup>27</sup>, yet we believe this number is a lot higher as many young carers remain hidden from view. Schools remain one of the best places to help with identifying young people with caring responsibilities as well as places to offer young carers with much needed respite and support. We are concerned that the pandemic pose significant challenges to existing carers and risks drawing more young people into caring roles as family members become ill with Covid-19.

With only around 5% of vulnerable children and young people entitled to a place at school attending,<sup>28</sup> we are concerned that many known young carers will remain hidden from view of statutory agencies. Teachers and school staff should be also be proactively reaching out to all known young carers who have been offered a school place and are not attending. And the Department for Education (DfE) must produce more sufficient advice and guidance to support schools and other agencies to increase the number of vulnerable children attending school, not just those previously known to children's services.

Schools should recognise that all known young carers are vulnerable and make it known to them that they are entitled to place at school, where it is safe for them and their families to take it up. Attendance could give them a break from caring, support their education, and also ensure that, should the situation at home deteriorate, they have access to supportive and known professionals who can ensure they are not put at risk and that their family's health care needs are met.

It is likely that young carers are experiencing increased anxiety concerning the health and well-being of their loved ones during this crisis. We know from our direct work with young carers that many of them report feeling distracted and worried during school hours due to concerns about people at home and what they might return to – this can lead to them not attending school as they feel compelled to stay at home and look after their loved ones.

Covid-19 provides a unique opportunity for teachers and school staff to have more 1-2-1 time with young people as class sizes are vastly reduced. This time should be used to check in with young people with known or suspected additional caring responsibilities and establish if they need additional support at home. There must be a clear referral pathway made available to teachers who may be teaching in hub-schools or in schools where safeguarding leads are working on a rota basis.

### **4.3 Access to IT equipment and broadband**

We know from our frontline services that many vulnerable children and families do not have the IT equipment or resources to be able to keep up with home learning, now that schools, colleges and universities have pivoted towards online learning. Many of the children do not have laptops, tablets or home computers to use and many families do not have the means to pay for unlimited broadband to access and download the resources their education providers have been sending.

As mentioned, we very much welcome the DfE's announcement<sup>29</sup> that some disadvantaged children will receive IT equipment as part of a push to make remote education accessible for pupils staying at home during the coronavirus outbreak. However the scheme is only being offered to children in the most vital stages of their education, those who receive support from a social worker and care leavers. Millions of children living in poverty – and as a result at risk of digital exclusion - do not have support from a social worker, and it is also unclear whether the scheme will be open to those who have no recourse to public funds or children in

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/characteristics-of-children-in-need-2018-to-2019>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/apr/21/just-5-of-vulnerable-children-were-in-school-in-england-last-week>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/get-help-with-technology-for-remote-education-during-coronavirus-covid-19>

asylum-seeking families. The plan to provide 4G routers is only open to disadvantaged secondary school pupils and care leavers, where those families do not already have mobile or broadband internet in the household.

- *Recommendation 15: Local authorities and CCG's should do targeted and wide scale advertising of the mental health support services available to children, young people and their families to ensure everyone has the help they need.*
- *Recommendation 16: The Government should provide guidance on the plans that should be put in place for children who are currently receiving mental health support from their school and other sources in order to prevent a deterioration in mental health.*
- *Recommendation 17: The Department of Health and Social Care should look to provide free basic training on online therapeutic counselling and mental health support in order to support professionals providing mental health support to children and young people.*
- *Recommendation 18: The Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Education should clarify the plans for the Green Paper proposals during the crisis.*
- *Recommendation 19: Young carers should be recognised as vulnerable in Department for Education's guidance, Coronavirus (COVID-19): safeguarding in schools, colleges and other providers. The guidance should give clear instruction to school staff about how to proactively reach out to young people and their families entitled to a school place but are not attending.*
- *Recommendation 20: The Department for Education should widen the additional technology scheme to ensure that disadvantaged children and families who are living in poverty and facing digital exclusion are able to access the scheme, even if they do not have a social worker and that the scheme does not exclude those who have no recourse to public funds.*

## **5. Financial implications of closures on pupils and families.**

There are four million children and young people living in poverty in the UK. In addition, we estimate that 1.7 million children aged 10-17 are living in a household with problem debt and an estimated 2.1 million children of the same age are living in household where there has been difficulty paying the bills.<sup>30</sup> Financial instability will rise during the pandemic and low-income families already unable to budget for unexpected expenses will be hit the hardest.

School closures, while an important way to stave the spread of COVID-19, could result in increased social isolation for young people. Although many schools are providing online learning, children whose families cannot afford access to laptops, phones or adequate internet or phone connections are likely to miss out on vital learning. For children who cannot access any such e-learning that schools are providing, there is also an added risk of stigma or shame.

Costs of living will increase for families as more children are at home, while earnings for parents are likely to decrease, meaning families will struggle with the cost of food and other essentials. Increased childcare responsibilities for parents while children are not in school, and without the possibility of help from family networks (such as grandparents), are also likely to put additional financial strain on families.

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<sup>30</sup> [https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/the-good-childhood-report-2017\\_full-report\\_0.pdf](https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/the-good-childhood-report-2017_full-report_0.pdf)

The outbreak of COVID-19 will continue to impact family finances, both in reducing income for many (such as parents on zero-hours contracts, with little job security or who work in particularly affected industries such as hospitality) and increased costs (of additional childcare, higher food and utility bills caused by family being at home more). Through our Coordinated Community Support (CCS) Programme and its partner organisations (including both Councils and voluntary sector organisations) in Tower Hamlets (London), Swansea (Wales), Oldham and Norfolk as well as an collecting evidence from an online form open to frontline practitioners within the emergency support sector.

## 5.1 Free School Meals

School closures will also result in the loss of free school meals for some children, which are worth around £400 per year per child<sup>31</sup>. The announcement of the national voucher scheme is welcome but does not go far enough in responding to the scale of the financial challenge facing families as a result of Coronavirus. The Government needs to ensure Free School Meal vouchers are easily attainable, without a significant time lag, and valid for exchange in a range of accessible shops or food outlets. This is a particular concern in more rural areas, where the choice of outlets may be limited.

We heard from some of our partner organisations that there have been some difficulties with the voucher scheme. In one local authority area, schools were providing vouchers for supermarkets that are local to the school, however there were cases where families are not local to the school they attend and this made it difficult to access the vouchers and supermarkets. We also heard that where vouchers were valid for the larger supermarket chains, families had to use them at the branches usually located in towns and cities, which are smaller and more expensive than other local grocery stores. Many families do not have cars so cannot go to the larger stores as they tend to be further out of town. Increasing the range of outlets that vouchers can be exchanged in or providing an alternative of cash payments where appropriate would improve the accessibility of the scheme.

Many households are likely to experience a drop in earnings during the pandemic and may become eligible to apply for Free School Meals for their child. This may be the first time that many families will interact with the social security system and it is important that families receive information on eligibility and how to apply for the Free School Meals voucher scheme so they are not missing out on financial support.

Similarly, the recent announcement that children in families who are subject to the NRPF condition will be eligible to access Free School Meals through the voucher scheme is welcome. However this extension of eligibility only applies to children in families with NRPF who are in receipt of local authority Section 17 assistance, meaning many families will still be ineligible for support. The Children's Society's latest report *A Lifeline For All* has analysed the number of children that could be subject to NRPF. From the Home Office Migrant journey data provided to us by the Migration Observatory, it shows that there were 142,496 children under 18 and 1,002,091 adults who had leave to remain in the UK at 31<sup>st</sup> December 2016<sup>32</sup>. The vast majority<sup>7</sup> will have had the NRPF condition applied to their immigration status. This compared to the data provided to us from the NRPF Network which showed that 8,117 families with at least 16,331 dependents were supported by local authorities under Children Act provision between 2015 and 2019 in England and Scotland<sup>33</sup> shows that thousands of children may still be unable to access free school meals during this period. As families with NRPF are usually locked out of accessing support through the social security system, it will be vital that the Government and other agencies widely publicise this change so that families are aware of their eligibility and how to access support.

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/free-school-meals-universal-credit-briefing-15-jan-2018-final.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/people-with-leave-to-remain-in-the-uk-by-gender-and-type-of-leave/>

<sup>33</sup> The NRPF Network Connect database provided data for families supported by 62 local authorities in England and Scotland, while Wales and Northern Ireland data is held separately.

We are also concerned that there is no requirement for schools to continue to provide the Universal Infant Free School Meal scheme for children not attending schools during the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>34</sup> Under usual circumstances, many children in low-income working families who would not normally be entitled to means-tested Free School Meals can receive help as a result of the Universal Infant Free School Meals offer.

If parents in these families (who do not reach the threshold for means-tested Free School Meals) are unable to access Universal Infant Free School Meals during the Covid-19 pandemic, providing their child with an extra meal every day is likely to add a large and unexpected cost to household budgets.

Parents in these families may be at risk of experiencing a significant fall in hours and earnings, as well as seeing expenses going up, and they will struggle to cover the additional costs of their child being at home.

Furthermore, the Government have not confirmed that the Free School Meals voucher scheme will continue to run over the summer holidays ...

- *Recommendation 21: Government to introduce a temporary uplift in Child Benefit Payments of £10 per child per week to help families meet additional costs incurred by children being at home and not in school.*
- *Recommendation 22: Government should extend the voucher scheme to include cash payments where appropriate, to improve the accessibility of the scheme so that all families are able to access food for their children.*
- *Recommendation 23: Government to provide clear and accessible information on how to access the Free School Meals voucher scheme for newly eligible groups.*
- *Recommendation 24: The Government should extend the Free School Meals voucher scheme to those in receipt of Universal Infant Free School Meals to ensure that low-income families who do not meet the earnings threshold for means-tested Free School Meals do not struggle to feed their children during the pandemic.*

## 6. Effects on disadvantaged groups.

### 6.1 Refugee and migrant children and young people

In 2019 The Children's Society provided support to 1,496 refugee and migrant children and young people. Many of the refugee and migrant children and families we support are at high risk of discrimination, destitution, social isolation and the national closure of schools due to the COVID-19 crisis is likely to increase the risks these children face during this time.

We are particularly concerned for those with a precarious immigration status, as well as those who may have leave to remain but are subject to the no recourse to public funds condition (NRPF). We know that because of this exclusion, there is a high risk that many of these children will fall between the cracks, unable to access healthcare, likely to suffer an income shock, insecure housing or miss out on vital support like school meal vouchers during this crisis. Due to the long-term disruption that will be caused by COVID-19, we know that local authority resources and capacity will be taken up in dealing with the outbreak, civil society work will likely be disrupted and services such as outreach scaled back. Already vulnerable and isolated families will be pushed further to the brink.

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<sup>34</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance-for-schools>

Thousands of children's access to vital benefits and support through public funds is dictated by their parents' status, even though the children themselves might be British. An audit of families affected by the NRPf condition supported by The Children's Society between 2015 and 2018 found that 68% had a child or multiple children born within the UK. These children have no other home apart from the UK, but they are being denied access to vital support at times of crisis.

Having NRPf means that affected children and families are prevented from accessing many in-work and out-of-work benefits such as child benefit, tax credits, Universal Credit, income-related Employment and Support Allowance, income support, local welfare assistance schemes, housing benefit and social housing. Unless their no recourse to public funds condition is automatically lifted, they will be excluded from most of the measures so far announced to support other families affected by the CV-19<sup>4</sup>.

No centrally collected data is publicly available on how many individuals and families have NRPf attached to their immigration status. From the Home Office Migrant journey data provided to us by the Migration Observatory, it shows that there were 142,496 children under 18 and 1,002,091 adults who had leave to remain in the UK at 31<sup>st</sup> December 2016.<sup>35</sup> The vast majority<sup>36</sup> will have had the NRPf condition applied to their immigration status. These estimates do not include the numbers of children who are undocumented across the UK and therefore also have no access to public funds<sup>37</sup>.

Many of these parents are working on zero-hours contracts, insecure or low wage jobs and are therefore at an increased risk of losing their livelihood in the current pandemic, particularly with schools and nurseries closed. A father interviewed for our most recent report *A Lifeline For All* worked 90 hours a week to support his family.

We know from our frontline service and other research<sup>8</sup> that many of these families are single parent households, primarily from Black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds, who will be unable to work following school closures because of childcare responsibilities. This will further increase financial strain on parents through a combination of reduced incomes and increased day-to-day costs as children remain at home. We know from our work that there appears to be a disproportionately high number of families with NRPf whose children have special educational needs and require additional support from supporting agencies. They are now unable to access these services with the closure of schools, leaving parents struggling to support their child's developmental needs.

While we understand the need for school closures in the interest of public health, it is important to highlight how schools often provide vital support to families with NRPf, enabling them to access food banks, receive advice and advocacy to access financial support and local authority care, as well as providing free school meals for some children and financial support including with clothing and basic provisions.

### 6.3 Unaccompanied and Separated Children

As our research has highlighted<sup>8</sup>, unaccompanied and separated children experience high rates of mental health issues and often have complex needs – some are similar to those of other looked after children while others will be different. For example, they will have language or literacy barriers, some will have experienced torture; the loss they feel of being separated from their parents and loved ones, and not knowing if they are safe, is often unbearable. They require timely, comprehensive and specialist support yet often fall through

<sup>35</sup> <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/people-with-leave-to-remain-in-the-uk-by-gender-and-type-of-leave/>

<sup>36</sup> Per the Home Office's Policy Equality Statement in 2015, 92% of the 11,046 applicants granted leave to remain under the 10-year family and private life routes from 1 January 2014 to 31 December 2014, were granted such leave with NRPf.

<sup>37</sup> <https://data.london.gov.uk/blog/how-many-undocumented-children-live-in-london/>

the gaps in statutory support, facing subsequent risks of mental health crisis, suicide and going missing (which can also be an indicator of exploitation).

Unaccompanied and separated children will be facing additional stress at this time because of their precarious immigration status. Many will be needing to apply to extend their leave to remain, submit fresh claims or are still waiting for an initial decision on their application, as well as those who are going through the EUSS. We know from our services that many of these young people are struggling to get hold of their solicitors or legal advisers and may be in the middle of a pending application with a looming deadline.

Some young people will also have their age disputed and will be subject to age assessments, which can be very triggering as they are lengthy processes where young people's credibility is questioned. Current practice seems to vary across local authorities however for some young people in our services, the age assessment has been carried out virtually due to social distancing – and it has been even more challenging providing support for young people undergoing such assessments. We have welcomed guidance around the lifting of reporting requirements and substantive interviews and appeal hearings being postponed, but many young people are still unclear about whether they are still meant to be reporting on a monthly basis at the Home Office, when their Home Office interview will take place and when they are due in court for their appeal hearing. These complex legal processes already take their toll on young people's mental health, at the best of times.

As frontline services wind down with the outbreak of CV-19, separated children and young people are likely to be severely isolated, with limited contact with their social worker or personal adviser. We know from our frontline services that the normality and routine of attending colleges, youth groups as well as faith and community groups play a significant role in maintaining stability and support for such vulnerable young people. Youth groups and advocacy services in different regions provide a lifeline to young people with no family in the UK – as children and young people will no longer be able to attend these services or drop-ins in person because of reduced services or as per government 'social distancing' advice, it is likely that many will feel isolated or unsupported and be at increased risk of mental health crisis.

Many such young people have limited English and low literacy levels and so are increasingly struggling with the requirement to rapidly engage with service provision through telephone and digital services, highlighting the need for targeted information, available in different languages where possible. Many have limited access to the internet and basic smartphones preventing them from accessing relevant and up to date information, as well as home learning. Many of the young people our services support have struggled with the technical language (including 'double click', 'space bar', 'delete') and have been easily confused by instructions to be added to video calls or signing in to email. We have also had concerns about digital safety issues as young people are being encouraged to use new apps and websites, sharing confidential and sensitive information about their immigration status and application, without any training or support on how best to protect themselves online.

- *Recommendation 25: The government must suspend the No Recourse to Public Funds condition so that all children and families can access vital benefits and crisis support.*
- *Recommendation 26: Local authority children's services need to ensure that UASC are able to access legal advice and support for their immigration applications during this time*
- *Recommendation 27: The government need to ensure there is targeted information for young migrants in different languages regarding the coronavirus outbreak and the changes in guidance, support and services during this period.*

May 2020